

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR  
PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE  
RESTORING EMERGENCY SERVICES TO PROTECT OUR NATION FROM DISASTERS  
("RESPOND") ACT  
MAY 9, 2006**

I'm proud to join in introducing this bipartisan bill, the RESPOND Act (Restoring Emergency Services to Protect our Nation from Disasters Act) today.

This bill will not only restore FEMA to an independent, cabinet-level agency, but it will also reform and strengthen our national emergency preparedness system so that we never again have to witness such a dismal failure by the federal government to respond to its citizens in need as we did with Hurricane Katrina.

Moving FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was the wrong thing to do. It trapped the agency – an agency that needs to be nimble and be able to marshal resources quickly – in a bureaucratic morass. During its time in DHS, FEMA has been partially dismantled, has been bled of necessary resources, has been unable to fill key management positions on a permanent basis, has been unable to make timely decisions to deal with

emergencies, and has been forced to focus on terrorism at the expense of natural disasters.

Although I am saddened by FEMA's current state of disarray, I am not surprised. During consideration of H.R. 5005, the Homeland Security Act of 2002, I offered an amendment to keep FEMA independent from the Department of Homeland Security.

I, along with many others, feared that including FEMA in the new Department would undermine its effectiveness by diverting resources away from its traditional mission of preparing for and responding to natural disasters, thereby leaving the federal government unprepared to respond to a disaster like Hurricane Katrina.

In testimony before the Select Committee on Homeland Security in July 2002, nearly 4 years ago, I set forth what I believed to be the dangers of moving FEMA to the newly-created Department. I stated:

To move [FEMA] into this new Department of Homeland Security without a clearly defined homeland security role is, my judgment, a mistake. We have not seen a delineation of what is homeland security compared to response to floods, hurricanes,

blizzards, earthquakes, tornadoes. You know, when your home is underwater up to the eaves are you going to wonder, where is FEMA? Are they on some mission looking for terrorists or are they going to be on a mission looking for your lost children and rescuing you from the rooftop of your home?

The bill we introduce today will help FEMA get back on track. By establishing FEMA as a cabinet-level, independent agency in the executive branch, the bill ensures that FEMA is not trapped in a massive department in which the Director of FEMA must work through levels of bureaucracy before taking appropriate action.

We also ensure that FEMA's core functions of preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation activities will once again coexist and work to complement each other in an independent FEMA, and not be separated and dismantled as they have been in the Department of Homeland Security.

In Committee hearings held in October 2005, emergency management officials from across the Nation testified that they believed FEMA needs to be moved out of DHS in order for it to function effectively.

I do not accept the arguments, put forth by some Members of the Other Body, that FEMA is so badly damaged it needs to be dismantled and the whole process of building an agency to respond to disaster or emergencies needs to start over. Nor do I believe, as some would suggest, that FEMA can be “fixed” by simply moving some boxes around in the Department of Homeland Security.

We know that FEMA can work well when it is given the proper resources – a qualified Director leading the agency, and a direct line between that Director and the President of the United States – because we have seen it work well. It was given all the things under the leadership of James Lee Witt during the Clinton Administration and it became a model agency.

The bill we introduce today is a bipartisan bill. It will reestablish the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as an independent, cabinet-level agency. It will ensure that the FEMA Director is chosen from among qualified candidates who have extensive experience in emergency management.

Further, the bill strengthens FEMA by providing it with the tools necessary to attract a competent, dedicated workforce, and by developing some of its essential capabilities, such as implementing a catastrophic planning

program and providing for enhanced logistics and communications capabilities. In addition, the bill provides for oversight and accountability of FEMA disaster funds.

Finally, the bill establishes a comprehensive emergency preparedness system, to ensure that no matter where the next disaster strikes, local, state and federal governments are able to respond effectively and save lives.

The RESPOND Act will begin the process of restoring FEMA to a level of competence that the American people expect and deserve.